

Peace Commission & Peace House: Complementary paths to peace

By Bob Morse / Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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I'm often asked whether the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) is the same as Peace House. Even though their histories overlap and their missions complement one another, Peace House and the ACPC are separate entities. Ashland is fortunate to have both.

Initially focused on disarmament, Peace House was founded by John Stahmer in 1983 amidst local Quakers. In its early years, Peace House was an affiliate of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest international organization dedicated to non-violence, which includes the lineage of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

From such interfaith roots the Peace House mission expanded during its second decade to include education and activism regarding war-torn areas in Latin America and the Middle East and to explore contested domestic issues through listening projects. A program focused on youth helped birth the well-established weekly community meal, affectionately named by the kids Uncle Food's Diner.

Non-violence, as well as free speech and economic justice, have been Peace House's guiding principles. In this spirit Peace House mediated the tense relationship between the various stakeholders concerned about Ashland's Watershed, which resulted in the now nationally recognized Ashland Forest Resiliency Project.

Besides advocating on public policy, Peace House educates on national and international issues such as military budgets and economic treaties, fully aware that such activity can bring up public discomfort due to the tremendous human suffering involved. Peace House risks bringing out into the open conflicts that have been muted, while endeavoring to expose the multiple sides of each conflict.

A chance meeting in 2012 of Herb Rothschild, then chair of the Peace House board, and David Wick, the Vice President of Pathways to Peace, resulted in a subsequent brainstorm session with human rights lawyer Eric Sirotkin as to how Ashland might honor the UN's International Day of Peace. The resulting Peace Day celebration, replete with a mayoral proclamation, was broadcast to the world on Peace Day TV. In the two following years, the three planners aligned Ashland with an international movement and held a Global Feast for Peace on Sept. 21.

Recognizing that local peace-building needed to be more sustaining than an annual feast, the three planners organized a work group of interested citizens to ponder what a culture of peace might look like in Ashland. They sensed that peace-building needed to be moved from the periphery to the center of the lives of all community members in order to be experienced on a daily basis.

The work group — in which Herb, David, and Eric were joined by Patricia Sempowich, Elinor Berman, Kathleen Gamer, and Irene Kai — eventually proposed to Ashland's mayor and city councilors a Culture of Peace Commission, comprised of representatives from the many sectors of the Ashland community. It was collectively decided that this would not be a city commission, but a citizen's commission. The mayor pledged "to lend appropriate encouragement and support to the Culture of Peace."

From its inception the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission's intention has been to foster community through building relationships. Peace House supports local lives by focusing on systemic concerns such as economic injustices, environmental degradation, and health care inadequacies. The ACPC gives voice to ways that such external forces may impede community health and a listening ear to help rectify this.

Whereas Peace House encompasses a local and global peace activist community, the Culture of Peace Commission interacts with the entire community in and around Ashland. While Peace House takes a stand against policies based in human or civil rights violations, the ACPC explores new non-divisive perceptions that invite harmonious solutions to emerge from community-based conflicts.

Peace House was founded in Ashland more than 30 years ago and continues to be alive and well, encouraging activism and maintaining an informed community. Ashland's Culture of Peace, rooted in more than 30 years of UN peace-building, emphasizes inclusivity to create a culture that encourages community-wide, peaceful co-existence.

Ashland is fortunate to have both.

Bob Morse is the coordinator of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission's Peace Ambassadors Team. To find out more about current projects and ways to get involved, contact the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission at www.ashlandcpc.org and Peace House at www.peacehouse.net.



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